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SUBJECT: MALIKI COURTS THE SADRISTS: STRATEGY, FEAR AND
LOATHING

REF: A. BAGHDAD 661
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 587
[1](#)C. BAGHDAD 583
[1](#)D. BAGHDAD 500
[1](#)E. BAGHDAD 251

Classified By: PMIN Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) The Sadrists' journey in the Iraqi political wilderness may be coming to an end. A Sadrists return to government, while not without risks, offers hope for a durable peace in Shi'a-majority parts of Iraq. It will also offer big challenges for us. Less than a year after his military operations that crippled Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), Prime Minister Maliki is pursuing three related tracks with the Sadrists: with armed groups, with Sadrists at the provincial level and at the national level. He has authorized reconciliation negotiations with JAM and its Special Groups (SG) offshoots, including Asa'ib ahl al-Haq (AAH), in order to draw reconcilables into the mainstream of Iraqi life and further isolate the most extreme elements. The fractured nature of these violent offshoots impedes reaching agreements and tying the negotiations with them into broader Sadrists reintegration.

[1](#)2. (S) Da'wa-Sadrists negotiations underway will bring the Sadrists back to a measure of political power, at least in some provinces. Sadrists provincial contacts place increased emphasis on governing capacity and generally sound moderate, raising hopes that their performance in government will be better this time. Da'wa members hope that progress with the Sadrists on issues such as detainees and canceled arrest warrants will save them from the potential embarrassment of giving the Sadrists many executive positions in provincial governments. Sadrists may also return at the national level, though this process is much less advanced or accepted. Da'wa and the Sadrists purport to share a common Iraqi nationalist outlook. A strong Maliki-Sadrists alliance could have a polarizing effect on Iraqi politics -- making it more difficult to achieve certain U.S. objectives, such as the containment and ultimate resolution of Arab-Kurdish disputes.
End summary.

Brief Background

[1](#)3. (S) For several months, the GoI, with U.S. assistance, has pursued negotiations with prominent Sadrists in Baghdad to develop a comprehensive reconciliation package for Sadrists militants. The ultimate goal is to bring reconcilable elements from violent Sadrists groups out of the armed opposition and into the mainstream of Iraqi political life. While non-partisan officials such as Deputy National Security Advisor (NSA) Dr. Safa' al-Shakhyh have carried out much of the nuts and bolts work, including primary contact with U.S.

personnel, the Prime Minister's top advisors have been involved, indicating that reintegration of Sadrists political parties has always been an implied part of the project. Last September, the Prime Minister and Da'wa Council of Representatives (CoR) member Sami al-Askari, among others, met for an iftar meal with Sadrists CoR members Baha al-'Araji, Salah al-Ubaydi, and Suhayl al-Iqabi to discuss a rapprochement that would begin to repair the deep distrust that defined Da'wa-Sadrists relations in the wake of ISF operations in the Spring of 2008. Shortly thereafter, Maliki approved an initiative proposed by Dr. Safa to conduct outreach and dialogue with members of JAM and select SG elements who had fled to Iran and Syria. The project envisioned early detainee releases -- from both Coalition Forces (CF) and GOI -- as a show of goodwill, followed by a phase in which the GOI defines and implements amnesty for combatants with no criminal record.

¶4. (S) In November, Safa submitted to CF names of Sadrists to be considered for release or to be offered an amnesty placement on CF restricted target lists. The request was complicated, since many of those listed were either not in CF custody, were in GOI custody, had already been released by CF or were unknown to CF. Of the 256 people Safa initially requested be released from CF custody, only 75 were actually in CF detention; 23 of these have since been approved by MNF-I for release. In a second request (also in November) submitted by National Security Advisor Muwafaq al-Rubaie, 87 of the 108 names were unknown to CF. MNF-I is staffing the 27 names that Safa requested that CF add to the RTL. Three low-threat detainees are considered a priority. Sadrists have expected quicker action from the GoI on detainee

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releases but nonetheless remained engaged.

Sadrists Negotiating Partners

¶5. (C) During the negotiations, Prime Minister Maliki, his confidantes, and his NSA office have worked closely with the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) leadership in Najaf, and with top Sadrists CoR members, including Aqil Abid Husayn Sajet al-Bazoon and Baha al-Araji. There are no reports of differences in opinion between OMS Najaf and the Sadrists Trend in parliament. OMS Najaf, in turn, handles primary communication with Muqtada al-Sadr in Iran. Sadrists CoR members have made frequent visits to the South to coordinate with provincial leadership (ref E). Nevertheless, Sadrists provincial concerns do not always align closely with the interests of OMS Najaf or the Sadrists Trend in CoR. The release/amnesty lists prepared for Dr. Safa by OMS/Sadrists Trend heavily emphasized members from Baghdad (and even specific neighborhoods), with Sadrists in key provinces such as Maysan and Wasit not listed. Many Sadrists who have been elected at the provincial level are less experienced politically, tend to take a more moderate approach than those at the national level, and are less invested in issues such as opposing the Security Agreement or defending JAM/SG leadership.

Lines of Negotiation: Provincial and National

¶6. (C) Since January, the GOI has simultaneously pursued three lines of Sadrists negotiations: the Prime Minister's discussions with the Sadrists bloc in parliament, talks with the Sadrists Tayar al-Ahrar list at the provincial level, and outreach to Special Groups. The first two lines are closely related, with provincial negotiations being the more advanced. In these discussions, the Sadrists have focused on their original goals of detainee releases, dismissal of warrants, cessation of targeting former JAM members, and

general amnesty (refs A, E). Sadrists had placed relatively little emphasis on gaining government positions on the provincial level. However, some contacts, including ISCI CoR member Tahsin al-Azawai and provincial Da'wa leaders, have told us recently that Sadrists have increased their demands for provincial executive positions, slowing down the alliance-formation process. Early reports from the provinces indicate that the Prime Minister, through the Implementation and Follow-Up Committee for National Reconciliation (IFCNR), has kept his promise to initiate in key provinces such as Basra, Maysan, Dhi Qar, and Karbala case reviews of Sadrists wanted by the police or already in detention (ref D). There have been some Sadrist detainee releases in recent weeks, but these appear to be part of the natural judicial process rather than the result of political deal-making.

17. (C) Prime Minister Maliki and his office have closely stage-managed the post-provincial election coalition-building process. Provincial contacts indicate that the State of Law list seeks to align with the Sadrists in every Shi'a-majority province except Karbala (where intra-Da'wa reconciliation is a priority) and Basra (where Maliki has an outright majority of seats). Some province-specific alliances (Maysan, Babil, Diwaniyah) appear to be more fully formed than others (Dhi Qar, Najaf). Many Da'wa contacts have told us recently that Maliki would prefer to form a core alliance with ex-Prime Minister Ibrahim Ja'afari's National Reform Trend, discarding proposed alliances with Sadrists in other provinces. This strategy, however, appears unfeasible since, outside of Dhi Qar, the mathematics of seat allocation works in favor of a Da'wa alliance with Sadrists rather than with other parties. In recent meetings with Senior Advisor Gray, Da'wa representatives such as Dhi Qar Deputy Governor Ahmed Taha and Babil party leader Abu Ahmed al-Basri were hesitant to specify the executive positions that Sadrists would gain at the provincial level (ref C). Da'wa members hope that progress on issues such as detainees and arrest warrants will save them from the potential embarrassment of giving the Sadrists executive positions in provincial governments.

18. (S) Discussions at the national level are designed to bring the 30 Sadrist parliamentarians back into the CoR's pro-Maliki bloc. (The Sadrists originally helped propel Maliki to the Prime Minister's position before they left government and the Unified Iraqi Alliance in 2007.) Muqtada al-Sadr is reportedly aware of these discussions and has approved them, according to Sadrist CoR member Baha al-Araji, who met twice with Coalition personnel in February. While Araji is convinced that partnership with Da'wa is the correct course, we hear conflicting reports of Sadrists' willingness to work with and defend Maliki. On March 4, Deputy Prime

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Minister Rafi al-Issawi (Tawafuq and former Iraqi Islamic Party) told poloff that the Sadrists would ally with Fadhilah CoR reps to support the IIP's Iyad al Samarie as candidate for speaker of the Parliament, against the wishes of the PM. (Comment: Contradictory reporting on Sadrist intentions reflects the Sadrists' penchant for indecision and frequent policy reversal.
End comment.)

Special Groups

19. (S) Meanwhile, the GOI is also working to reconcile members of JAM Special Groups, some of whom are in Iran and Syria. These discussions, led by the PM's office and by Dr. Safa, aim to identify SG members willing to quit violence and to offer appropriate incentives to encourage their peaceful return and reintegration into Iraq. Many former JAM members currently in Iraq have proven amenable to this approach. In a recent example, two long-time JAM members sought out Coalition personnel and declared a desire to reconcile along

with 250 other former fighters who they believed should be removed from wanted lists. These JAM leaders claimed they sought a return to normalcy, but expressed considerable distrust of GoI security agencies at the national and provincial levels. The GoI is doing case reviews both at the national and provincial level, coordinating with CF where appropriate.

¶10. (S) With Coalition guidance and support, the GoI is also attempting to disarm and demobilize members of AAH, an elite militia group formed from JAM fighters by Qays al-Khazali, currently a CF detainee. The GoI's aim is to convince the group to stop all violent acts and to break AAH's links to the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force -- a real challenge, as most of the group's leadership resides currently in Iran and reportedly receives Iranian funding. Another challenge is that many in AAH and the GoI (below the Prime Minister) perceive reconciliation efforts as more a matter of how and for what price the release of AAH detainees is to be secured. The negotiations are made yet more difficult by Muqtada al-Sadr's public denunciations of AAH for "abandoning the Jihad" in its alleged discussions with the GoI and CF. In a late February meeting, Sadrists CoR member Araj said he was aware that the PM's people were meeting with AAH and believed that Iran had been included in the discussion and had guaranteed to Maliki it would stop support to the SGs. While it is unclear whether Sadrists CoR members are comfortable with the GoI's pursuing the reconciliation of combatants whose loyalty to Muqtada is not assured, discussions with AAH have done no apparent harm to the core political negotiations with Sadrists at the national and provincial levels.

Prime Minister's Motivations and Risks

¶11. (C) The Prime Minister has several reasons for pursuing his Sadrists strategy. The most immediate goal, which may not have been apparent when the project started, is to gain Sadrists CoR support in order to defend against a possible vote of no-confidence. Da'wa contacts have also hinted at a longer-term goal in which their party -- an elite, intellectual movement -- develops partnership with Sadrists, thus benefiting from the Sadrists' reach into the Shi'a masses. As Da'wa CoR member Alaq phrased it, noting the Prime Minister's large share of the vote in Sadr City in the provincial elections, "we want to change the Sadrists" by working with them and addressing their voters' concerns. Whether such an alliance is sustainable over the long term is debatable, but Da'wa and the Sadrists purport to share a common Iraqi nationalist outlook. They also spring from a common root: Mohamed Bakr al-Sadr and the establishment of the Da'wa party in the 1950s.

¶12. (C) The risks to Maliki in agreeing to an alliance with the Sadrists lie in ceding them too much authority at the provincial level, e.g., by granting Sadrists appointments to key positions in provincial government and that they will be visibly corrupt or otherwise fail to govern effectively. On the positive side, most new Sadrists PC members are educated and very few have known associations with militias, or past corruption in government. In Babil, Muthanna, and DhiQar provinces, even ISCI/Badr members conceded in recent meetings with Senior Advisor Gray that most new Sadrists PC members in their respective provinces held engineering degrees and were qualified for the positions on PC service-delivery committees that they had requested. Nearly everyone is still apprehensive about their prospective re-entry, however. As outgoing DhiQar PC Chairman Ihsan Talim (Fadhilah) noted,

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many Sadrists who ran ministries in Baghdad in 2005-2007 were similarly chosen from outside the core Sadrists organization and were either powerless to stop the corruption or actively

participated in it.

¶13. (C) Also, many Sadrism Trend and Da'wa members are less than convinced of the wisdom of lining up together, which makes the alliance subject to erosion from within. With alliance drawing closer, Da'wa contacts such as Governor Aqeel in Karbala and CoR member Kasim al-Sahlan, previously enthusiastic about outreach to Sadrist, were visibly apprehensive about the idea in recent meetings. Sadrist remain leery of the PM for having sent the Iraqi Security Forces to confront JAM in Basra, Maysan and Sadr City in Spring 2008. That said, moderate Sadrist felt liberated by the JAM's defeat, a sentiment demonstrated in the strong returns for the SoL coalition in Basra and Baghdad, two cities with many Sadrist.

Badr and Other Security Concerns

¶14. (S) Releasing JAM members from detention also could lead to a return to violence, either through Sadrism-Badr clashes in Iraq's southern provinces or from unreformed militants returning to combat. Sadrism complaints of detainee mistreatment by ISCI/Badr operatives were a primary factor in their decision to seek alliance with Da'wa; enmity between the Sadrist and ISCI/Badr is still fresh. The JAM members who recently sought out MNF-I officials claimed abuse at the hands of Badr-dominated Iraqi Police in Diwaniyah; Sadrist in CF detention complain frequently of recriminations directed at them by Badr-led provincial security officials upon their release from CF detention. In discussions with the GOI, AAH members have requested that the GOI insist that CF detainee releases occur in Baghdad, leaving it up to the released detainee whether he wishes to return to his home in the provinces. ISCI/Badr is monitoring the reconciliation process with alarm. Dhi Qar Governor Aziz Kadhim Alwan told Senior Advisor that Sadrism CoR member Baha al-Araji had recently visited Nasiriyah prison, telling Sadrism prisoners that they will soon be released and that they will (and should) exercise the right to sue policemen, local officials and judges involved in their cases -- many of whom are ISCI/Badr members (ref A). Latif Hassan al-Hasani, an ISCI PC member from Muthanna, said that newly elected Sadrism PC members had made similar visits in his province and in Diwaniyah (septel).

¶15. (C) While much diminished over the past year, Sadrism attacks against the GoI and CF have not gone away completely. IED blasts actually increased throughout the south in late February-early March. While it is unclear who is behind the attacks, notable increases were seen in Basra, South Babil, Wasit, and DhiQar, all provinces where the recent creation of Promised Day Brigades (PDB) has been reported. The PDB was formed in late 2008 by elements loyal to Muqtada, partly in order to lure active AAH members back to Muqtada's side. AAH members involved in reconciliation discussions with the GOI indicated in meetings with Coalition personnel their belief that Muqtada's November 14, 2008 statement denouncing AAH was aimed at drawing away trained AAH fighters to form the core of his new PDB organization.

Marja'iyah Wariness of Sadrist

¶16. (C) In forming an alliance, Prime Minister Maliki also will have to manage expectations of the marja'iyah, which historically have not approved of Muqtada and his methods. Historically have not approved of Muqtada and his methods. Recent contacts such as Da'wa CoR member Sami al-Askari and former Governor of Najaf/current Ministry of Interior Deputy Adnan al-Zurfi hinted that the Najaf religious hierarchy is uncomfortable with a Da'wa-Sadrism alliance but did not provide details. Sayyid Majid Jasim, Grand Ayatollah Sistani's representative in Dhi Qar province, said that the hawza had not expected the Sadrist to perform so well. He sounded less than thrilled about the second-place finish of

Tayar al-Ahrar in his province. Taking a more philosophical tack, Sayyid Majid then pointed out the solid educational credentials of the new Sadrist PC members and expressed hope that Maliki would be able to "calm them down" by bringing them into the government. He added that, while in government, "(the Sadrists) won't be able to do anything by themselves." (ref A)

Comment: Da'wa-Sadr: A New Shi'a/Arab Sectarianism?

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¶17. (C) Approval from Shi'a religious leaders will become especially important for Maliki, since he increasingly appears to be pursuing a strategy of reuniting the Shi'a parties in advance of the national elections, with ISCI in a reduced role. There are several reasons why ISCI might not go for this, most notably its alliance with the Kurds and the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party, but also its strong, continued animosity toward the Sadrists. A Da'wa-Sadrism alliance, lined up in opposition to a KDP/PUK-ISCI-IIP alliance, might be able to attract other Shi'a parties such as Fadhilah and National Reform Trend. Among Sunnis, Salah al-Mutlaq's National Dialogue Front and Hewan might be amenable (although that Sunni Arab support is not assured). If the Sunni Arabs do join, the result would be a core alliance with a very strong Arab nationalist streak. If Sunnis do not join, the bloc would still have a strong Arab nationalist flavor as well as a strong Shi'a sectarian streak. Either way, such a grouping would likely be distrustful of both Iran and the Kurds. It would have little incentive from its popular support base to take a conciliatory approach to the Kurds on key internal disputes, including the Green Line and hydrocarbons.

¶18. (C) A stronger Sadrist presence in national and provincial government might also hamper U.S. ability to work closely with the GOI on key issues. USG communication with Sadrists is negligible in national parliament and sporadic at the provincial level. We have seen several recent indications that the Sadrist leadership is restricting our access to new Tayar al-Ahrar PC members. In Karbala, for example, two new Sadrist PC members reportedly had planned to attend a March 7 PRT reception in honor of the new Council but, on the morning of the event, received a call from Muqtada himself instructing them not to attend. Sadrist PC members in Basra turned down recent Embassy requests to meet in very blunt fashion. Still, it is possible that our relationship with the Sadrists will improve once they have an increased role in government. For example, in formerly Sadrist-run Maysan, Sadrist PC members have been in government several years and have grown increasingly receptive to working with the USG on development and governance -- at times even asking the USG to mediate their disputes with the central government (ref B). Such openings won't come immediately; very few Sadrists have reached this stage, and working with a potential Maliki-Sadrist governing team likely will prove a tremendous challenge for us. End comment.

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